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SUBJECT: VO VAN KIET'S EMBATTLED LEGACY, ONE YEAR AFTER HIS PASSING

REF: (A) 08 HCMC 360, (B) HANOI 412, (C) 08 HCMC 543

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¶11. (SBU) Summary: One year after the death of reform-minded former prime minister Vo Van Kiet, supporters say his ideas are largely ignored by the current Party leadership even as it tries to co-opt his legacy. Kiet is particularly revered in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), where he earned his revolutionary credentials and, as HCMC Party Secretary, developed his reformist ideas. Elites in HCMC, however, dismiss current Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's efforts to use Kiet's memory to revive Dung's own image as a reform-oriented leader. Instead, they speak of a continuing vacuum in the reformist camp because nobody today has Kiet's combination of revolutionary and reform credentials. Despite their cynicism, HCMC intellectuals (including many who recently raised an unprecedented public outcry against Party policy on bauxite development) say Kiet's ideas and outspokenness continue to inspire them to continue his path towards reform and a more democratic Vietnam. End summary.

Jostling to Inherit a Legacy

¶12. (SBU) In Vietnamese culture death anniversaries are important milestones, with responsibility for performing annual rituals to the departed's heir. So Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung raised eyebrows in HCMC on May 28 when his office instructed all major print and online newspapers in Vietnam, two days before former Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet's death anniversary, to publish a piece by Dung commemorating that occasion. HCMC press contacts told the Consulate that the media had received a direct order from Dung's office that his article receive front-page coverage, and that no other articles on Kiet could be published before his.

¶13. (SBU) The prime minister's article was little more than the typical communist leadership encomium, praising Kiet as an ardent liberation fighter, great renovator, national reconciliation pioneer and economic reformist. But once the essay was published, the proverbial flood gates opened. Numerous articles, both in the official press and the blog community, portrayed Kiet as the last of the "doi moi generation" of Vietnamese leaders: a great reformer, reconciler, but most of all, a democracy supporter who had the unique position and credentials to publicly advocate reforms.

¶14. (SBU) Political observers in HCMC told us they interpreted Dung's move as an attempt "to redeem his image as a reform advocate" and, in particular, to appeal to the reform-minded intellectuals who have recently come out en masse against the GVN's policy of bauxite excavation in the Central Highlands. A reliable contact told us that given how little respect for Kiet's wishes and ideas Dung and the GVN have shown over the last year, the PM's trick has proven "counter-productive" with HCMC intellectuals and failed to win the Prime Minister any

points.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind?

15. (SBU) Kiet's supporters divide his achievements into two phases: his reforms while in power and his ideas after stepping down. While Kiet is revered by most (if not all) for the policies he put in motion while in power, reformers complain the GVN has ignore his subsequent ideas for reform. For example, in the run-up to the 10th Party Congress, Kiet wrote a widely circulated letter that urging the Party to democratize itself and familiarize the society with democratic practices. He also advised that the 15-member Politburo return decision-making power to the 150-member Central Committee. Just prior to his passing, Kiet voiced concern against a hasty expansion of the city of Hanoi but top Party leaders didn't waver. On May 29, the National Assembly, under Party's pressure, approved the decision.

16. (SBU) More recently, Kiet's death wishes are also being ignored. In his publicized will, he specifically urged Vietnam not to name any streets after him, yet authorities in the central coast province of Quang Ngai officially named a street in Van Tuong town (near the newly opened Dung Quat oil refinery) in his memory, with Prime Minister Dung in attendance at the naming ceremony. In his will, Kiet expressed that he did not want any kind of shrine dedicated to him. Yet on May 31, the Standing Party Committee of Kiet's home province of Vinh Long announced that it would build a memorial structure. (Comment: For many, this would, of course, evoke memories of Le Duan's decision to embalm Ho Chi Minh and build a mausoleum, ignoring Ho's instruction that his remains be cremated. End comment.)

A Vacuum Yet to be Filled

17. (SBU) Just who will be the heirs to Vo Van Kiet's legacy remains to be seen, but on May 30, "a small group of family and

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close friends" commemorated the first death anniversary of the former Prime Minister, according to someone who was present. Noticeably absent from this firsthand account was any mention of GVN or Party officials, who turned out in droves for Kiet's June 2008 funeral (reftel). Kiet's passing creates a vacuum to be filled, wrote Nguyen Trung, a reform advocate and popular internet journalist. Trung speaks for many when he says that Kiet "went away too early," highlighting the fact that the reform camp now lacks a true leader. According to another HCMC intellectual, Kiet and other "doi moi leaders" possessed a potent combination of revolutionary credentials and reformist ideas that uniquely qualified them to challenge the Party status quo. This contact observed that Vietnam's next generation (by virtue of age, if nothing else) must find another road.

Comment:

18. (SBU) Kiet's enduring legacy appears to be not just the Doi Moi policies he helped put into place, but the inspiration and encouragement he had ignited among intellectuals and the general public alike -- today, many of the leading petitioners against the bauxite excavation consider themselves Kiet's disciples. While dismissive of PM Dung's efforts to co-opt Kiet's legacy, many Consulate contacts nevertheless believe the recent level of outspokenness and public debate on major social issues (including democracy) is irreversible. Kiet apparently initiated, to quote a blog entry to commemorate him, a path that "he wanted others to continue on after him." While nobody is yet able to replace Kiet in the driver's seat, many intellectuals still believe the vehicle of reform is ultimately heading in the direction he had desired. End comment.

19. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.
DICKEY